

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Lorraine Hansberry Residence

other names/site number Multiple property nomination: no

## 2. Location

street & number 337 Bleecker Street ☐ not for publication

city or town New York ☐ vicinity

state New York code NY county New York code 061 zip code 10014

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☒ nationally ☐ statewide ☐ locally. ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.

R. David Mackay  
Signature of certifying official/Title

3/11/2021  
Date

DS-170  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register.  
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the  
National Register.  
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the  
National Register.

☐ removed from the National  
Register.

☐ other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Lorraine Hansberry Residence**

Name of Property

**New York County, NY**

County and State

**5. Classification****Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

☒ private☐☐ public-State☐ public-Federal**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

☒ building(s)☐ district☐ site☐ structure☐ object**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing

Noncontributing

\_\_\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_\_\_ objects

\_\_\_\_\_ 0 \_\_\_\_\_ 0 Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

\_\_\_\_\_ 1 \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Function or Use****Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/specialty storeDOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/specialty storeDOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description****Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Mid-nineteenth century

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation stonewalls brick

\_\_\_\_\_

roof \_\_\_\_\_

other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)



**Lorraine Hansberry Residence**

Name of Property

**New York County, NY**

County and State

**8 Statement of Significance****Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☒ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria considerations**

(mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References****Bibliography**

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

LiteratureSocial History: LGBTSocial History: Ethnic Heritage, Black

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**Period of Significance**1953-1960

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**Significant Dates**n/a

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**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Lorraine Hansberry**Cultural Affiliation**na

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**Architect/Builder**unknown

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**Lorraine Hansberry Residence**

Name of Property

**New York County, New York**

County and State

**10. Geographical Data****Acreage of property** .02 acres**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	18	584082	4509670
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2			

3			
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4			

☐ See continuation sheet**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**name/title Sarah Sargent; revised and edited by Amanda Davis Contact: Kathleen LaFrank, NYSHPO,  
[Kathleen.lafrank@parks.ny.gov](mailto:Kathleen.lafrank@parks.ny.gov)organization NYCLGBT Historic Sites Project date January 2021street & number 71 West 23 Street #903 telephone \_\_\_\_\_city or town New York state New York zip code \_\_\_\_\_**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets****Maps**A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.**Photographs**Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name \_\_\_\_\_

street &amp; number \_\_\_\_\_ telephone \_\_\_\_\_

city or town \_\_\_\_\_ state \_\_\_\_\_ zip code \_\_\_\_\_

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.470 *et seq.*)**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

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### Summary

The Lorraine Hansberry Residence is located at 337 Bleecker Street, in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City. The three-story, five-bay brick building was constructed in 1861 in the Italianate style. It is sited mid-block on the east side of Bleecker Street, between West 10<sup>th</sup> Street to the north and Christopher Street to the south. The property is significant under Criterion B in the area of literature and under Criterion A for Social History: LGBT and Ethnic History: Black for its association with the influential Black lesbian playwright, writer, and activist Lorraine Hansberry, who resided there from 1953 to 1960. It was previously listed on the National Register as a contributing component of the Greenwich Village Historic District.

The block surrounding 337 Bleecker Street is characterized by low-scale, two- and four-story brick residential buildings with commercial ground floors. These buildings all date to the nineteenth century. Across the street, on the west side of Bleecker Street, are two apartment houses with their entrances on the side streets: 218 West 10<sup>th</sup> Street, a six-story building from 1928, and 95 Christopher Street, a sixteen-story building erected in 1930-31. The blocks to the north and south along Bleecker Street are lined with additional low-scale brick buildings dating from the nineteenth century and a few twentieth-century apartment buildings. All of these buildings are contributing elements of the Greenwich Village Historic District, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

### Description

The building at 337 Bleecker Street is three stories tall and five bays wide with storefronts on the ground floor and apartments above. It was built in 1861 of brick with a stone foundation and is surmounted by a flat roof. Fenestration is symmetrical and each of the second and third stories has five six-over-six double-hung wood sash windows. Windows feature heavy, projecting stone lintels and smaller stone sills, both painted white. At the roofline is a projecting wood cornice with a paneled frieze and paired brackets

The first story is characterized by two wood and glass storefronts, which are set to either side of an off-central entrance door. A cornice with small modillions, added at some time after 1965, divides the first and second stories. With the exception of the storefront cornice, the exterior of the building appears to be largely unchanged from the time Lorraine Hansberry resided in the building, from 1953 to 1960.

According to historic I-card images, the interior of 337 Bleecker Street was divided into four apartments (two on each floor) by 1902. By the time Lorraine Hansberry moved to the building in 1953, the floorplan had

☐ See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2

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changed so that a single apartment occupied each of the second and third floors. These basic spatial divisions remain today, with apartment 1A occupying the second floor, and apartment 2C (formerly known as 2A) occupying the third floor.<sup>1</sup> Hansberry's apartment was on the third floor, known as apartment 2C today.

The interior of the building at 337 Bleecker Street has undergone a variety of alterations. Historically, the first floor has housed small commercial shops, which is in keeping with its current use. In the 1950s, overlapping with Hansberry's time in the building, the northernmost ground floor storefront housed a laundromat. The centrally located entrance to the apartments and vestibule also largely retain their character from Hansberry's period, including a mosaic tile floor. The central staircase retains a historic period wood balustrade, characterized by a turned newel and balusters. The second-floor apartment, which was identical in plan to Hansberry's third-floor residence (see below), remains exceptionally well preserved and reflects the character of the building during the period of significance (1953-1960). All character-defining architectural elements and interior finishes on the second floor remain extant. These include the overall apartment layout with two separate wood entrance doors, crystal-shaped plaster wall openings at either side of the narrow passageway that runs parallel to Bleecker Street and connects the two originally separate apartments into a single unit; the brick fireplace in the living room; window openings and wood sash windows, wood floors, and plaster wall finishes.

Hansberry's apartment, on the third floor, has been somewhat altered. While it retains the same number of rooms and basic spatial divisions, the proportions of some rooms have been slightly changed. The apartment layout is U-shaped around the entrance stair (as it was once two separate apartments, one on either side of the stair). There is a new entrance from the stair into the front of the apartment, into the hyphen that linked the two separate spaces. There are still rooms on either side of the stair, although uses have changed. Plain, undecorated plaster walls remain as they were during the historic period. In addition to the U-shaped plan, other original elements include the windows facing Bleecker Street and those on the rear elevation (with the same views of historic buildings and landscapes that Hansberry would have seen); private rooms on the northern end of the apartment connected by a hyphen along the Bleecker Street elevation to the more public rooms on the southern end; the ceiling heights, the living room shape, and its intact brick fireplace. The living room was very likely the location where Hansberry and her husband, Robert Nemiroff, first read *A Raisin in the Sun* to their friend Philip Rose as they entertained him for dinner in the summer of 1957, the night before Rose decided to produce the landmark play. The fireplace was also where Hansberry nearly destroyed a draft of *Raisin* before Nemiroff intervened.

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation between subsequent tenant in the building and Sarah Sargent, August 15, 2020.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3

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The private, northern end of the apartment held Hansberry's writing studio (now a bedroom) overlooking Bleeker Street and a bedroom overlooking the rear yard. The writing room contains a brick fireplace; however, the mantel has been lost. The view over Bleeker Street is much the same. A hyphen connected this end to the more public rooms on the southern end, which included the living room facing Bleeker Street, the kitchen and another bedroom facing the rear yard. The current layout retains the hyphen that connects the northern end to the southern end, which features the same living room, kitchen, and bedroom areas; the kitchen has been reduced in size so that the bedroom could be enlarged.

Following the success of *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway, the prominent photographer David Attie took photos of Hansberry in her apartment at 337 Bleeker Street for *Vogue Magazine*. The images from 1959 show the newly famous playwright in her writing studio, bedroom, and living room, which are all characterized by bare, light-colored walls with no visible decorative detail. She was also photographed in front of the fireplace (extant) in the living room. Far more than any fixed architectural element, plain walls lined with books were the most significant character-defining features of Hansberry's apartment. Writer Elise Harris noted the "book-lined apartment" in her 1999 article on Hansberry in *Out*, a gay magazine, which was based on an interview Harris had conducted with many of Hansberry's lesbian friends, including Renee Kaplan, who was Hansberry's one-time girlfriend and was familiar with the Bleeker Street apartment.<sup>2</sup> The Attie photographs show Hansberry in front of bookcases and bookshelves in the living room, hyphen, and bedroom. Hansberry also had access to the roof and was photographed next to a flue (extant) on the northern end. The roof is inaccessible today.

### Integrity

The exterior of the Lorraine Hansberry Residence retains a high level of integrity to the period of significance, 1953 to 1960. The one addition is the storefront cornice. The building itself retains its original mixed uses, with two historic storefronts on the ground floor and a central entryway leading to a foyer and staircase to the upper apartments. The second and third stories have one apartment per floor, as they did during Hansberry's time. While the second-floor apartment provides a reference for the integrity of Hansberry's living quarters, the third-floor apartment, where Hansberry lived, retains its square footage and overall volume, U-shaped floor plan, windows, general room divisions, and unembellished plaster walls. Significantly, the living room and its fireplace remain, as does the room where Hansberry wrote, overlooking Bleeker Street. The most significant detail of the Hansberry period, bookcases filled with books lining the walls, was an ephemeral and easily

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<sup>2</sup> Elise Harris, "The Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry," *Out*, September 1999.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 4

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reversible feature. It is the only thing needed to recapture the feel of the apartment where a milestone in Black theater and one of the most important plays of the twentieth century was written.

☐ See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 1

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### Summary Paragraph

The Lorraine Hansberry Residence, 337 Bleecker Street, in Greenwich Village, is nationally significant under Criterion B in the area of literature for its association with the pioneering Black lesbian playwright, writer, and activist Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965). Hansberry resided in a third-floor apartment in the building from 1953 to 1960, the majority of her adult life and the period in which she created her most important works. During this time, she wrote her groundbreaking play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, in the apartment and, in 1957, first read it aloud there to her friend Philip Rose, who went on to produce it. In March 1959, Hansberry made history as the first Black woman to have a play staged on Broadway with *Raisin*'s premiere at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in Manhattan. During these years, she also became also the first African American playwright and the youngest playwright to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best American Play. An instant celebrity, Hansberry was photographed in her book-lined apartment on Bleecker Street for *Vogue* Magazine one month after the play's premiere. *A Raisin in the Sun*, considered a classic, has become part of established literary canon and is taught in schools throughout the United States. The play is also still widely produced.

The Hansberry Residence is also significant under criterion A in the areas of Social History: LGBT and Ethnic History: Black because of the important role that Hansberry occupied at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. During this period, Hansberry was also a dedicated activist for social justice, and she worked alongside civil rights activists, such as her friends writer James Baldwin and singer Nina Simone and contributed to a variety of publications that focused on racial justice, communism, women's equality, and LGBT causes in her lifetime. Many of these articles were written in her apartment at 337 Bleecker Street. Even before the success of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry privately began to explore her lesbian identity; she found community in her small lesbian social circle in Greenwich Village and had at least two relationships with women who lived close to her Bleecker Street apartment. While she was vocal about civil rights and other issues – speaking at an NAACP rally in Washington Square Park in 1959, for example – she remained private about her sexuality, choosing instead to participate in LGBT issues anonymously through her writing, both before and after she achieved fame for *Raisin*. She was among the earliest literary contributors to *The Ladder* (1956-1972), the national monthly magazine of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the country's first lesbian rights organization, founded in San Francisco in 1955. Her letters, signed with her initials, to the trailblazing publication often revealed her inner conflict regarding societal expectations for women and her same-sex desires. Under a pen name, Hansberry submitted lesbian-themed short stories to *The Ladder* and the major Los Angeles gay magazine *ONE* (1953-60). Hansberry was also an early member of DOB's New York chapter, founded in 1958. The production of *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway was incredibly powerful. Hansberry

☐ See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 2

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made history as the first Black woman to have her work produced on Broadway. The play was also one of the few to include a focus on Black characters.<sup>1</sup> To have a play produced by a young woman, and a young Black woman at that, was remarkable in an age when plays staged on Broadway were typically written by older white men. Hansberry had opened a new chapter in American theater, one that included Black people.<sup>2</sup> In “Sweet Lorraine” (1969), James Baldwin explained the play’s significance:

I had never in my life seen so many black people in the theater. And the reason was that never before, in the entire history of the American theater, had so much of the truth of black people’s lives been seen on the stage. Black people had ignored the theater because the theater had always ignored them.<sup>3</sup>

Having a large cast of Black characters on Broadway created an “unprecedented opportunity” for Black actors, and nearly a thousand showed up for open-call auditions.<sup>4</sup>

In 1960, using the proceeds from *Raisin*, Hansberry purchased the residential building at 112 Waverly Place, [extant] in Greenwich Village. From that year until her untimely death from cancer in January 1965, she split her time between the Waverly location and a cabin she purchased in Croton-on-Hudson, in Westchester County. However, she became ill within several years of her move, and while she continued to write and be active in the civil rights movement and other causes in her final years, her residence at 337 Bleecker Street remains the most significant property associated with Hansberry, as well as the place most closely associated with her body of work as an artist. The apartment, which was described as a small, sparsely decorated walkup with a “little back workroom” where Hansberry wrote, retains its basic floor plan, including the living room with fireplace, Hansberry’s writing room overlooking Bleecker Street, original windows, and some finishes. The period of significance is 1953-1960, the period in which Hansberry resided at this address.

In recent years, scholars have expanded their interpretation of her life and work to include her sexual identity, particularly her impact as a lesbian artist, writer, and activist of color. In addition to documentaries and

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<sup>1</sup> “Background and Criticism of A Raisin in the Sun,” *Chicago Public Library*, April 30, 2003.  
<https://www.chipublib.org/background-and-criticism-of-a-raisin-in-the-sun/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*, Directed by Tracy Heather Strain (Lorraine Hansberry Documentary Project, 2017), Digital Film.  
<https://www.sightedeyesfeelingheart.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> James Baldwin, “Sweet Lorraine,” (1969) in *Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words: To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, adapted by Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), xviii.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 3

biographies, Hansberry has been the subject of several retrospectives and scholarly discussions at leading New York City cultural institutions, such as the Brooklyn Museum and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, where her papers are stored. In 2014, a Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun* earned three Tony Awards, including Best Revival of a Play.

### Early Life

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago, Illinois, on May 19, 1930, to Nannie Perry Hansberry and Carl Augustus Hansberry. The childhood that followed left her with a deep and abiding sensitivity to the role that place and the built environment can play in shaping lives – a theme that would continue in the works she would eventually produce at 337 Bleeker Street and throughout her lifetime.

Hansberry grew up on the South Side of Chicago. Her mother was a schoolteacher and her father a successful businessman. Hansberry's father was known as the "kitchenette king" for his role in subdividing the single-family apartments on the South Side.<sup>5</sup> Catering to new Black arrivals from all over the United States, he bought established apartment buildings and renovated each unit into a series of smaller apartments, dubbed "kitchenettes."<sup>6</sup> The family's success and middle-class status, however, did not separate Lorraine from the working-class families who rented her father's apartments. Unable to procure housing in the highly segregated white neighborhoods of Chicago, the Hansberry family often lived in the same building they rented out.<sup>7</sup> At that time segregation was strictly enforced by individual property covenants, which prevented Black families from purchasing a nicer home in the so-called "white neighborhoods."<sup>8</sup>

Mamie Hansberry, Lorraine's sister, noted that "the one thing in life Daddy hated was segregation, and he spent his money and all of his willpower toward eradicating discrimination."<sup>9</sup> In 1937, Carl Hansberry purchased a house in the white neighborhood of Woodlawn to take a stand against the segregation he so despised.<sup>10</sup> Backed by prominent legal and political figures, the move was designed to inspire legal change.<sup>11</sup> Lorraine was just

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<sup>4</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>5</sup> Imani Perry, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston: Beacon Press: 2018), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>10</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>11</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 4

seven years old at the time.<sup>12</sup> The house at 6140 South Rhodes Avenue was designated a local Chicago landmark on February 10, 2010, “for its associations with the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement and iconic twentieth-century African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry.”<sup>13</sup>

The move to a white neighborhood, where discrimination was both rampant and violent, left a profound impact on Hansberry. One night, an angry crowd gathered outside the family’s new home. Her sister recalled, “Lorraine was sitting on the loveseat, and that’s when they threw this huge piece of mortar. That mortar lodged in the wall and just missed her.”<sup>14</sup> Her mother took to patrolling the property with a loaded gun in order to protect her four children.<sup>15</sup> Attacked by a piece of discarded building material picked up from the very property her father had worked so hard to obtain, Hansberry realized that despite her family’s wealth and social status, she would not be protected from race-based violence.<sup>16</sup> She later wrote that “my memories of this ‘correct’ way of fighting white supremacy in America included being spat at, cursed, and pummeled on the daily trek to and from school.”<sup>17</sup>

After the white mob threatened the Hansberrys, the Woodlawn Property Owners Association filed a case with the circuit court to force the family to vacate the property.<sup>18</sup> A preliminary court decision on the restrictive property covenants forced the family to move away from the house a few months after the mortar incident, but Lorraine’s father appealed the decision.<sup>19</sup> The case took three years to resolve and eventually went all the way to the United States Supreme Court.<sup>20</sup> In 1940, he was awarded a bittersweet partial victory in *Hansberry v. Lee* – though the family was allowed to take ownership of the property, racially restrictive covenants remained in place. The court had come to a decision based on the fact that the original covenant had lacked enough signatories to be binding and was therefore improperly executed as a contract. Though it was not the far-

<sup>12</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>13</sup> City of Chicago, “Chicago Landmarks: Lorraine Hansberry House.”

<sup>14</sup> Mamie Hansberry, Lorraine Hansberry’s sister, quoted in *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>15</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>16</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>17</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, quoted in *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>18</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>20</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*, and Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 17.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 5

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reaching win that Hansberry's father had hoped for, the court decision opened over 500 new properties in Chicago to ownership by African Americans.<sup>21</sup>

By 1945, Hansberry's father had "lost faith in America's legal system to guarantee equality to its African-American citizens."<sup>22</sup> After fighting for years to reduce segregation through challenges within the court system, he decided to move the family to Mexico. Lorraine stayed in Chicago to finish her sophomore year of high school.<sup>23</sup> While in Mexico in March 1946, Hansberry's father died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage.<sup>24</sup> Her mother sent Lorraine a telegram to inform her of the devastating news, which read in stark prose: "Daddy passed will be home as soon as possible with body be brave. Mother."<sup>25</sup>

The death of her father hit Hansberry hard. It was not only a devastating personal loss, but one tied directly to her experience of the broader society-level fight against racial inequality and discrimination. The loss of her father to a stress-related ailment opened her eyes to the limitations of working within the established legal and capitalist systems to obtain justice.<sup>26</sup> Her father had relentlessly followed the American dream and had worked vigorously and tirelessly to end segregation, and, in Lorraine's mind at least, it had cost him his life.<sup>27</sup> The incredible drain of fighting systemic racism had been too much, even for the successful and well-respected "Kitchenette King" of Chicago. Imani Perry, author of *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (2018), notes that his death, aside from forcing Lorraine to grapple with the realities of grief, "pushed her towards a different way of trying to approach the questions of race and justice."<sup>28</sup> Her activism in later years clearly reflects a strategy that was vastly different from her father's, though motivated by the same strong drive for racial equality.

Hansberry graduated from high school in 1948 and moved to Madison, Wisconsin, to attend college at the University of Wisconsin.<sup>29</sup> Though the school was largely left-leaning, she was one of few Black students on

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<sup>21</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart* and Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>23</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>24</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>27</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>29</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 26.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 6

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campus and was fairly miserable there.<sup>30</sup> However, the experience did open her eyes to the world of theater. One play struck a particular chord with Hansberry: Seán O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*.<sup>31</sup> She was impressed by O'Casey's realism, as well as his use of characters that were complex, messy, and not limited by ethnic stereotypes. Years later, after *A Raisin in the Sun* was produced, she said:

I love Sean O'Casey. He is the playwright of the twentieth century using the most obvious instrument of Shakespeare: the human personality in its totality. I've always thought this was profoundly significant for Negro writers, not to copy, but as a model, a point of departure.<sup>32</sup>

In the summer of 1949, Hansberry travelled to Ajijic, Mexico, with a summer art program that was sponsored by the University of Guadalajara.<sup>33</sup> The bohemian village of Ajijic was isolated and was populated by a wide variety of artists. Perry chose not to speculate on Hansberry's romantic relationships, if any, while in Ajijic, but noted that the people "living and loving in their own ways" there had a significant impact on her.<sup>34</sup>

Hansberry's attendance at the University of Wisconsin lasted less than two years. By the spring of her sophomore year, Hansberry was on academic probation, and she decided to leave to "look for education of a different sort."<sup>35</sup>

### New York City

In the fall of 1950, Hansberry moved from Wisconsin to New York City to attend college at the New School for Social Research in Greenwich Village, where she lived.<sup>36</sup> She attended classes there for two months before dropping out.<sup>37</sup> Later that fall, her first published work, a poem entitled "Flag from a Kitchenette Window," appeared in *Masses and Mainstream* (1948-1963), an American Marxist monthly magazine headquartered in the

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<sup>30</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 29.

<sup>32</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 38.

<sup>35</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 46.

<sup>36</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 43.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 7

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city.<sup>38</sup> In 1951, she found herself drawn to the center of Black life in Harlem and moved uptown, residing first at 499 West 130th Street, then moving to 504 West 143rd Street, unit 6A. By the end of 1951, she had moved to 820 West 180th Street, apartment 41, in Washington Heights.<sup>39</sup>

While living in Harlem, Hansberry began working at the publication *Freedom*, which had recently been founded by the Black leftist actor and singer Paul Robeson.<sup>40</sup> The weekly newspaper covered Black political and social issues, including global news, anti-colonialist struggles, and domestic activism against Jim Crow.<sup>41</sup> *Freedom*'s editor was Louis Barnham, a Harlem native and key figure in the Black leftist community.<sup>42</sup> Barnham became a mentor to Hansberry, who quickly shifted her duties from clerical to editorial and writing work.<sup>43</sup> She published several articles in the journal and began to emerge as a writer as well as an editor. As Perry writes, "It became a home of sorts, and ground for immense growth."<sup>44</sup> Scholar Mary Helen Washington notes that:

Contrary to the mainstream image of the award-winning Broadway author of [A] *Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry of *Freedom* was a militantly left-wing, antiracist, anticolonialist, socialist feminist.<sup>45</sup>

Hansberry's political activism was not limited to the articles she wrote for *Freedom*. According to Perry, "Lorraine lived her life in New York as an activist."<sup>46</sup> She talked at Harlem's Speaker's Corner at West 135th Street and Lenox Avenue, attended protests, and became further enmeshed in the Black leftist political movement.<sup>47</sup> Her position at *Freedom* afforded her the chance to engage with a variety of Black political voices of the time, and she learned extensively from them.

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<sup>38</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 53; Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965.

<sup>40</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 47.

<sup>42</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 46.

<sup>43</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 47.

<sup>44</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 47.

<sup>45</sup> Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst, eds, *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 194.

<sup>46</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 8

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In 1951, Hansberry fully embraced the Communist movement.<sup>48</sup> In a letter to her friend Edythe, she wrote:

I am sick of poverty, lynching, stupid wars and the universal maltreatment of my people and obsessed with a rather desperate universal desire for a new world for me and my brothers. So dear friend, I must perhaps go to jail. Please at the next painting session you have... remember this 'Communist!'<sup>49</sup>

Hansberry became involved with the Jefferson School of Social Science, a Communist Party-affiliated adult education center, as both a student and instructor.<sup>50</sup> The school was located in a nine-story building at 575 Sixth Avenue, in Chelsea. There, she met W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the foremost civil rights leaders, co-founder of the NAACP, and founder/editor of *The Crisis*, its monthly magazine. Du Bois recognized Hansberry's talents, calling her "the girl who could do everything."<sup>51</sup> She was energized by the opportunity to study with him and recorded her takeaways from many of his lectures in her journals.<sup>52</sup>

Hansberry continued her activism in 1952, when she was called to attend the Inter-American Peace Conference in Montevideo, Uruguay.<sup>53</sup> Paul Robeson had had his passport revoked years earlier by the United States Department of State after refusing to sign an affidavit renouncing any affiliation with the Communist Party.<sup>54</sup> As a result, Hansberry was chosen as his replacement and went to the conference as his representative. Under the guise of "vacationing in Europe," Hansberry flew to Uruguay and delivered a recorded message from Robeson.<sup>55</sup> As one of only five delegates from the United States, she was proud of the opportunity to represent her country.<sup>56</sup> Her attendance at the conference attracted the attention of the FBI, which began to track her.<sup>57</sup> FBI surveillance reports on her activities and publications would eventually produce well over 1,000 pages of documents from 1952 until her death in 1965.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 49.

<sup>49</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 49.

<sup>50</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 51.

<sup>51</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 51.

<sup>52</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 57.

<sup>54</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 57.

<sup>55</sup> Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965. Accessed through F.B. Eyes Digital Archive, <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/fbeyes/hansberry>; Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 57.

<sup>56</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965.

<sup>58</sup> Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 9

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In early 1952, she met Robert Nemiroff at a protest against racially discriminatory hiring practices at New York University.<sup>59</sup> Nemiroff was Jewish and a native New Yorker, and he shared Hansberry's radical leftist political views and intellectual aspirations. At the time, Nemiroff was the managing editor of *New Challenge*, the official monthly publication of the Communist-affiliated Labor Youth League.<sup>60</sup> He was supportive of her writing and would remain a close friend and supporter until her death. Though reserved in their early courtship, Hansberry eventually declared her love for him. They were married in June of 1953.

### Life at 337 Bleecker Street

Shortly after their marriage, she moved with Nemiroff to the third-floor apartment at 337 Bleecker Street, in Greenwich Village. The building, constructed in 1861, was built by neighboring resident William Patterson as a home for his son, William Jr. A floor plan sketch from 1902 reveals that, at that time, the ground floor contained two storefronts, and the second and third floors held two apartments each. During Hansberry's time there was only one apartment on each floor, and one of the storefronts was occupied by a laundromat.<sup>61</sup>

Nemiroff's family had rented the apartment at 337 Bleecker Street since around the time he was twelve years old (c. 1941), and he had lived there with his parents since then.<sup>62</sup> Although the apartment was small, FBI records indicate that Nemiroff's parents may have been living in the apartment when Hansberry first moved in.

Hansberry worked a variety of part-time jobs in the early years of living at 337 Bleecker Street, including as a waitress at Nemiroff's parents' restaurant.<sup>63</sup> Nemiroff took on copywriting and typing work and was eventually hired by a small rhythm and blues label called Glory Records. In 1956, he wrote a song with his friend Burt D'Lugoff called "Cindy, Oh Cindy."<sup>64</sup> The song was an unexpected hit and the royalties were enough to allow Hansberry to resign from her part-time work and focus exclusively on her writing.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 60.

<sup>60</sup> Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965.

<sup>61</sup> Elise Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry," *Out*, September 1999. "Sarah Fonseca."  
<https://girlsinitouko.medium.com/the-double-life-of-lorraine-hansberry-out-magazine-september-1999-a60c1d471d49>

<sup>62</sup> Conversation between Sandy Lyons and Sarah Sargent, September 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>64</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>65</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 10

Greenwich Village in the 1950s – the period in which Hansberry lived at 337 Bleecker Street – was popular with artists, writers, the LGBT community, and political radicals, who either lived in the neighborhood or frequented its many commercial establishments, parks, and live venues. While people of color also took part in this scene, leading to more integrated spaces than found in many other parts of the city, writer (and Hansberry’s friend) James Baldwin, for example, noted his experiences with racism at some of the neighborhood cafes.<sup>66</sup>

New, experimental theater, such as the Caffè Cino (NR listed) near Hansberry’s apartment, was also popular.<sup>67</sup> Strain notes that “any night in the Village in the mid-1950s, on a dozen small, spare stages, Hansberry could sit and watch dramatists working through the urgent problems of the day.”<sup>68</sup> The neighborhood was clearly well suited to Hansberry and provided an important backdrop while she wrote on her typewriter in her book-lined apartment. Hansberry describes her writing process while living on Bleecker Street:

Basically, I’m an extremely undisciplined person. I sleep every day until 11 or 12. Then I’ll get up and have coffee with anyone who drops in. I’ll go out and sit in the park when I should be working, or sit right here and stare at the floor.<sup>69</sup>

Hansberry’s reference to the park further suggests that the West Village neighborhood played a role in shaping her process as a writer. It would also provide her a platform for her activism, as was the case with Washington Square Park – the park Hansberry may have been referring to in the quote above – which was historically a site of activism and protest. Hansberry could often be found making speeches for the NAACP and protesting for equal rights there.<sup>70</sup> As the filmmaker Tracy Heather Strain notes, “Hansberry didn’t have far to go to find inspiration. She had only to walk down the stairs of 337 Bleecker and out the front door to enter a village like no other on the American scene.”<sup>71</sup> The neighborhood clearly left a lasting impact. Later, Greenwich Village

<sup>66</sup> James Baldwin Residence, located at 137 West 71<sup>st</sup> Street, on the Upper West Side, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2019. To learn more about his experience as a Black man while living and hanging out in Greenwich Village, see the National Register nomination.

<sup>67</sup> Caffè Cino, located at 31 Cornelia Street, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2017. For background on experimental theater in the Village at that time, see the National Register nomination. Given the proximity of the Cino to Hansberry’s Bleecker Street apartment, it is possible that she attended productions there, though no evidence has been found so far to suggest this.

<sup>68</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>69</sup> Ted Poston, “Closeup,” *New York Post*, March 22, 1959.

<sup>70</sup> “Pride Spotlight: The Remarkable Lorraine Hansberry,” blog, *Washington Square Park Conservancy*, June 5, 2018, <http://washingtonsquareparkconservancy.org/news/2018/06/05/remember-the/>.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 11

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would feature prominently in her final play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, which premiered on Broadway in 1964.

Hansberry and Nemiroff decorated their apartment sparsely. The space was later described by Hansberry as “small and cluttered” and “a mess.”<sup>72</sup> She noted, “We have a ramshackle Village walkup apartment...with a little back workroom, and I just stayed in that little old room all day and wrote.”<sup>73</sup> The “little back workroom” was most likely a front bedroom that faced the street. This was where she wrote *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and, following the play’s success, was where she was photographed next to her typewriter for *Vogue Magazine*. Shaunielle Perry, Hansberry’s cousin, said of those days on Bleecker Street, that “Lorraine was always over her typewriter. She smoked and drank coffee and just wrote all the time.”<sup>74</sup>

Hansberry was serious about literature. Floor-to-ceiling built-in bookshelves (possibly added by Hansberry and Nemiroff) were located in the living room next to the fireplace, and at least one article, appearing in the *New York Times*, refers to the apartment as being “lined with books.”<sup>75</sup> Access to printed material was very important to Hansberry, perhaps more so than a sense of coherent decor. Burt D'Lugoff, a friend of Nemiroff, remembered that “the Bleecker Street apartment was a two-story walkup, with about four or five rooms. They filled it rapidly with all kinds of newspapers and publications.”<sup>76</sup> In 1959, following the Broadway premiere of *Raisin*, Hansberry noted, “I’m a writer, and this is a workshop. We’re not celebrities or anything like that. But I am going to try to get the landlord to paint the hall. We’re not bohemians. They can’t carry us that far.”<sup>77</sup>

Even more so than other writers, the concept of place and home was especially important to Hansberry. Her early childhood had been defined by her father’s struggle to move his family into a white neighborhood in Chicago, and, as a result, she was a keen observer of people’s relationships to the built environment. The apartment at 337 Bleecker Street served not only as a home and workshop but also as a source of inspiration. Imani Perry notes that:

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<sup>72</sup> Penny Fox, “Success Makes Work Easier for Prize-Winning Author,” *Newsweek*, February 16, 1960.

<sup>73</sup> Quote from 1959 *New Yorker* article reprinted in Leo Seligsohn, “Bringing Life to a Hansberry Legacy,” *Newsday*, November 16, 1970.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>75</sup> “Her Dream Came True: Lorraine Hansberry,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1959; Harris, “The Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry.” Harris based her article on an interview she conducted with many of Hansberry’s lesbian friends, including Renee Kaplan, who was also Hansberry’s one-time girlfriend and was familiar with the Bleecker Street apartment.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>77</sup> Poston, “Closeup.”

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 12

---

In her most famous published work [*A Raisin in the Sun*], interior domestic spaces are always important, so much so that the apartments become characters. They are sites of intimate reckoning with large social forces and also the closest of relations.”<sup>78</sup>

The Bleeker Street living room emerges frequently in accounts of how *A Raisin in the Sun* was written. The living room fireplace, in particular, is an important design feature in an otherwise relatively unadorned apartment, and it remains extant. In a 1959 interview with Ted Poston, Hansberry described becoming frustrated with her progress on a draft of *Raisin* while sitting in the living room:

“If it hadn’t been for him [husband Robert Nemiroff], this play would have never hit the boards.” She recalled the night she had read through the almost-completed script of *Raisin* and decided it was “the worst effort I’d ever made at anything.” So she threw the whole thing at the ceiling, and, as the sheets fluttered all over the living room, went to get a broom to sweep them all into the fireplace.

“Bob didn’t rebuke me at all, except with a look,” she recalls. “He just got down on the floor and picked up every sheet of it. He put it back together and kept the whole thing out of my sight for several days. And then one night when I was moping around, he got it out and put it in front of me. I went to work and finished it.”<sup>79</sup>

Hansberry often had friends and acquaintances over for dinner, but one evening social hour in particular turned out to be a life-changing event. In the summer of 1957, she invited Nemiroff’s friend Philip Rose over for dinner.<sup>80</sup> That night, in the Bleeker Street apartment, she read *A Raisin in the Sun* aloud to an audience for the first time.<sup>81</sup> Hansberry later wrote of the event that:

I started out reading it in this chair and ended up sprawled down on the floor. We started discussing it, and found ourselves arguing about the characters as people. It lasted almost all night.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 87.

<sup>79</sup> Poston, “Closeup.”

<sup>80</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 92.

<sup>81</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 92.

<sup>82</sup> Poston, “Closeup.”

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 13

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The next morning, Rose called to say he wanted to produce her play and gave her \$500 to secure his rights to the production.<sup>83</sup> *A Raisin in the Sun* was on its way to the professional stage.

### Production of *Raisin in the Sun*

Raising enough funds to produce the play took Philip Rose fifteen months.<sup>84</sup> Prior to *A Raisin in the Sun*, serious Black theater was considered “box office poison” to major white investors.<sup>85</sup> The typical large investors of Broadway productions declined to support something that was seen as risky for a multitude of factors: It was written by a young Black woman, who was a completely unknown playwright, and it included primarily Black characters. The attitude of large theater owners on Broadway was “why should I tie up my theater to an audience that isn’t going to come?”<sup>86</sup> However, Rose was eventually able to gather the money from a trickle of about 147 smaller investors by January 1959.<sup>87</sup> No amount of money was turned down, no matter how small; some of Rose’s friends, who were not wealthy, contributed ten or fifteen dollars.<sup>88</sup>

*A Raisin in the Sun* had tryouts starting in January 1959 in smaller theaters in New Haven, Philadelphia, and Chicago.<sup>89</sup> The goal was to test its financial success, with the aim of attracting a financial backer on Broadway.<sup>90</sup> It passed the test and soon became a hit with Black and white audience members alike. The play opened on March 11, 1959, at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, located at 243-251 West 47th Street (extant). On October 19, 1959, it moved to the Belasco Theater, located at 111 West 44th Street (extant), where it continued to run for another eight months before closing on June 25, 1960. In total, it was performed 530 times. In addition to the Broadway production, a series of touring productions brought the story to theaters across America.<sup>91</sup> By 1960, the play had been translated into thirty languages.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>84</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 96.

<sup>85</sup> Harris, “Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry.”

<sup>86</sup> Harris, “Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry.”

<sup>87</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*; AFI CATALOG OF FEATURE FILMS *THE FIRST 100 YEARS 1893–1993*. <https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/MovieDetails/23718?cxt=ymal>

<sup>88</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>89</sup> Samuel G. Freedman, “Yale Marking 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ‘Raisin in Sun,’” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1983, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Harris, “Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry.”

<sup>91</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>92</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 14

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The play follows the Youngers, a working-class African American family on the South Side of Chicago, where Hansberry grew up. In it, they ponder what to do with a \$10,000 insurance check received after the death of the family patriarch. A central drama of the play centers around Mama's dream of owning a house in a white neighborhood. Son Walter Lee Younger hopes to open a liquor store with some of the money to escape from his chauffeur job. Daughter Beneatha dreams of attending medical school. Mama puts a down payment on a house in the white neighborhood of Clybourne Park. However, their neighbors send Mr. Linder, a representative of the "Clybourne Park Improvement Association," to offer the Youngers money to stay away. In the end, the family refuses and moves into their new home anyway. The name of the play comes from the poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes. It reads:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*<sup>93</sup>

The production of *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway was incredibly powerful. Hansberry made history as the first Black woman to have her work produced on Broadway. The play was also one of the few to include a focus on Black characters.<sup>94</sup> At the time, only ten dramas authored by Black playwrights had been produced in the history of Broadway.<sup>95</sup> All of them had been written by men.<sup>96</sup> Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* was the only play

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<sup>93</sup> Langston Hughes, "Harlem."

<sup>94</sup> "Background and Criticism of *A Raisin in the Sun*," *Chicago Public Library*.

<sup>95</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>96</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 15

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by a Black playwright that had run for close to a year, in 1935.<sup>97</sup> The audiences who went to see Hansberry's play had never experienced anything like it performed on stage. To have a play produced by a young woman, and a young Black woman at that, was remarkable in an age when plays staged on Broadway were typically written by older white men. Hansberry had opened a new chapter in American theater, one that included Black people.<sup>98</sup> In "Sweet Lorraine" (1969), James Baldwin explained the play's significance:

I had never in my life seen so many black people in the theater. And the reason was that never before, in the entire history of the American theater, had so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on the stage. Black people had ignored the theater because the theater had always ignored them.<sup>99</sup>

Having a large cast of Black characters on Broadway created an "unprecedented opportunity" for Black actors, and nearly a thousand showed up for open-call auditions.<sup>100</sup> Playwright William Branch noted that prior to *Raisin*, "There were occasional roles that had been written by white writers, they were the 'these, those, and them' kinds of roles, which had no real relationship to the realities of African American life."<sup>101</sup> Despite the massive audition turnout, director Lloyd Richards already had an idea of who he wanted to see in the leading parts (with *Raisin*, Richards himself was a pioneer as the first Black director to helm a Broadway production). He reached out to his friend Sidney Poitier, the best-known Black star of the time.<sup>102</sup> Against his agent's advice, Poitier agreed to play the role of Walter Lee Younger.<sup>103</sup> Another connection was with Ruby Dee, who played Ruth, Walter Lee Younger's wife.<sup>104</sup> Other cast members included Claudia McNeil, Diana Sands, Ivan Dixon, Lonnie Elder III, John Fiedler, Ed Hall, and Glynn Turman. Ossie Davis later replaced Poitier.

*A Raisin in the Sun* also attracted the attention of the FBI, which was still following Hansberry's activities. It sent an agent to an early showing to determine the show's level of "communist propaganda." The agent responded with a relatively insightful note, reporting that:

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<sup>97</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>98</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>99</sup> Baldwin, "Sweet Lorraine," in *Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words*, a adapted Nemiroff, xviii.

<sup>100</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>101</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>102</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>103</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>104</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 16

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The play contains no comments of any nature about Communism as such but deals essentially with Negro aspirations, the problems inherent in their efforts to advance themselves, and varied attempts at arriving at solutions....The play was well attended. Comments from whites appeared to indicate that they appreciated the drama and the quality of acting...few appeared to dwell on the propaganda messages.<sup>105</sup>

*Raisin* quickly gained widespread popularity. In April 1959, less than one month after the Broadway premiere, Columbia Pictures paid Hansberry \$300,000 for the rights to turn the play into a film.<sup>106</sup> She received an additional \$50,000 to adapt the screenplay.<sup>107</sup> While Hansberry tried hard to create a film that would depict the story in a way that she was happy with, she lost battles throughout the production process.<sup>108</sup> On her first draft of the screenplay, one studio executive, thinking about the reaction of white mainstream moviegoers, commented that "it was agreed that the addition of race issue material in the screenplay should be avoided," as it might "lessen the sympathy of the audience."<sup>109</sup> Hansberry refused to change any so-called "race material" in her second draft, and it was met with even more critical comments. In the end, parts of Hansberry's script were cut from the final version.

In an echo of the storyline and Hansberry's own experience, while shooting a scene outside a West Side Chicago home, the presence of Black cast members prompted concern from white neighbors.<sup>110</sup> The neighbors contacted the owner of the home, fearful that the crew's presence meant they might be planning to sell the house to Black people.<sup>111</sup> Despite the issues with the production, Hansberry managed to keep the studio executives from completely changing the story. She lauded the film in public, though privately she was disappointed.<sup>112</sup> The picture opened in March 1961 at the Forum Theatre and Trans-Lux 52nd Street Theatre in

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<sup>105</sup> Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965.

<sup>106</sup> AFI CATALOG OF FEATURE FILMS  
THE FIRST 100 YEARS 1893-1993. <https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/MovieDetails/23718?cxt=ymal>

<sup>107</sup> AFI CATALOG OF FEATURE FILMS  
THE FIRST 100 YEARS 1893-1993

<sup>108</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>109</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>110</sup> AFI CATALOG OF FEATURE FILMS  
THE FIRST 100 YEARS 1893-1993.

<sup>111</sup> AFI CATALOG OF FEATURE FILMS  
THE FIRST 100 YEARS 1893-1993.

<sup>112</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 17

New York City. It starred most of the original Broadway cast and was a modest box office success.<sup>113</sup> In 2005, the film *A Raisin in the Sun* was listed on the Library of Congress's National Film Registry. The registry "is a list of films deemed 'culturally, historically or aesthetically significant' that are recommended for preservation."<sup>114</sup>

### Lesbian Identity

Hansberry privately identified as a lesbian, and her exploration of her attraction to women continued to grow during her time at 337 Bleecker Street. In a journal she once wrote: "I know what I have always known, before consciousness even, that most important it has to be her, I mean, the woman. It apparently simply will not be the man for me."<sup>115</sup>

Hansberry's public persona was still tied to her association with her husband, but her private life focused on the knowledge that she was a lesbian. At the time the mold of a "proper married woman" was difficult to break, and there was great pressure for her to maintain a domestic facade. One 1960 news article, appearing in *Newsweek*, referred to her as a "wife, homemaker, and writer."<sup>116</sup> Even the FBI, with their hundreds of pages of observations (and clear view of her as a potent threat), categorized her based on her marriage. One undated report notes that "Her main occupation, other than housewife, is playwright, and a recent notable play which was written by her is 'A Raisin in the Sun,' starring Sidney Poitier."<sup>117</sup>

The scholar and literary critic Cheryl Higashida has argued that Hansberry's lesbianism and intersectional feminism is clearly embedded in her body of work, even if it is less obvious in some cases.<sup>118</sup> In 1958, Hansberry began writing, according to Higashida, "what is perhaps her only play with an entirely lesbian cast of characters, *Andromeda the Thief* (1961), featuring Sappho as its protagonist."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>114</sup> AFI CATALOG OF FEATURE FILMS  
THE FIRST 100 YEARS 1893-1993.

<sup>115</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, quoted in *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>116</sup> Penny Fox, "Success Makes Work Easier for Prize-Winning Author," *Newsweek*, February 16, 1960.

<sup>117</sup> Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965.

<sup>118</sup> Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945-1995*. (n.p.: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 59

<sup>119</sup> Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 68-69.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 18

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In 1957, Hansberry unofficially separated from her husband, though the two continued to live together at 337 Bleecker Street until 1960.<sup>120</sup> The separation was kept secret from the press and from the FBI. In a 1960 interview, Hansberry carefully parsed her recent purchase of a townhouse at 112 Waverly Place in terms of needing space to write. Hansberry was quoted as saying that her Bleecker Street apartment had been “a mess...because there was too much business for too small a place.”<sup>121</sup> Her separation from Nemiroff was not explicitly discussed. Their occupation of two different addresses was only commented on insofar as to say that while Hansberry worked at home, Nemiroff wrote elsewhere, and that “she still seeks his advice.”<sup>122</sup>

The FBI received a similar story when they contacted Nemiroff at 337 Bleecker Street. An anonymous agent reported in Hansberry’s file that:

It is believed that the purpose for these two addresses is business reasons inasmuch as during the above mentioned pretext subject’s husband stated that his wife was not available and had ‘retreated’ to her private residence at 112 Waverly Place, where she was unavailable for interview. The subject’s husband indicated that this was the customary practice of his wife whenever she was engaged in writing.<sup>123</sup>

Hansberry’s separation from her husband seemed to have given her more freedom to explore her lesbian identity. She was an early member of the New York chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), a self-described “homophile organization” and the first organization in the United States to cater specifically to lesbians. DOB was founded in San Francisco by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyons in 1955, and a New York chapter was established in 1958.<sup>124</sup>

Lyons and Martin travelled from California to New York in November 1958, and during that trip they met with Hansberry at her home at 337 Bleecker Street.<sup>125</sup> They had written to her in advance, and their impression of her

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<sup>120</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>121</sup> Fox, “Success Makes Work Easier.”

<sup>122</sup> Fox, “Success Makes Work Easier.”

<sup>123</sup> Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965.

<sup>124</sup> “The Red Dot Collection,” *Greenwich Village History*, October 2, 2012, <https://greenwichvillagehistory.wordpress.com/tag/daughters-of-bilitis/>

<sup>125</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 81.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 19

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during their visit was that she was “smart, pretty, and gracious.”<sup>126</sup> The pair recalled Hansberry saying that she “just couldn’t get more involved” with the DOB.<sup>127</sup> There is no evidence that Hansberry attended any meetings or conferences at the local chapter, but she was an important early contributor to *The Ladder*, DOB’s national monthly magazine.<sup>128</sup> The scholar Marcia M. Gallo writes of the publication’s history:

For women who came across a copy in the early days, *The Ladder* was a lifeline. It was a means of expressing and sharing otherwise private thoughts and feelings, of connecting across miles and disparate daily lives, of breaking through isolation and fear. For female artists and intellectuals, *The Ladder* was an accessible workshop in which to try out creative efforts and new ways of analyzing experiences of same-sex love and eroticism. For political activists, it was a forum for debating tactics and strategies and publicizing meetings and public gatherings.<sup>129</sup>

Hansberry’s short stories and letters to *The Ladder* were always anonymous, often published under her initials or a pen name. In 1958, Hansberry published the short story “Chanson du Konallis” in an issue of *The Ladder*, under the pen name Emily Jones. She also published three other lesbian-themed short stories: “The Budget,” “The Anticipation of Eve,” and “Renascence,” in the Los Angeles-based gay magazine *ONE*, using the same pseudonym.

In 1957, around the time that she and Nemiroff separated, Hansberry wrote a letter to *The Ladder*, using her initials to protect her identity. According to Kevin Mumford, her letter “developed what may be identified as the first theory of intersectionality.”<sup>130</sup> In it, she writes:

I wanted to leap into the questions raised on heterosexually married lesbians. I am one of those. How could we ever begin to guess the numbers of women who are not prepared to risk a life alien to what they have been taught all their lives to believe was their natural destiny—AND—their only expectation for ECONOMIC security?<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 81.

<sup>127</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 81.

<sup>128</sup> Kevin Mumford, “Opening the Restricted Box: Lorraine Hansberry’s Lesbian Writing,” *OutHistory*.  
<https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/lorraine-hansberry/lesbian-writing>.

<sup>129</sup> Marcia M. Gallo, “Celebrating the Years of ‘The Ladder,’” *Off Our Backs*, vol. 35 (May-June 2005), 34-36.

<sup>130</sup> Mumford, “Opening the Restricted Box.”

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 20

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In another letter to *The Ladder* in 1957, Hansberry writes:

I'm glad as heck that you exist. You are obviously serious people and I feel that women, without wishing to foster any strict separatist notions, homo or hetero, indeed have a need for their own publications and organizations. Our problems, our experiences as women are profoundly unique as compared to the other half of the human race. Women, like other oppressed groups of one kind or another, have particularly had to pay a price for the intellectual impoverishment that the second class status imposed on us for centuries created and sustained. Thus, I feel that THE LADDER is a fine, elementary step in a rewarding direction.<sup>132</sup>

Hansberry's residence at 337 Bleecker Street placed her at the heart of the small but vibrant lesbian social scene in Greenwich Village. In 1958, Hansberry began to attend events in the "almost cotillion-like" scene, likely described as such in reference to the close-knit groups where women made their "debut" into the arena of lesbian dating.<sup>133</sup> The dinner parties and gatherings were often couched as other events – one woman recalls telling her landlord that the women coming to her house were her sorority sisters – and were often held in private.<sup>134</sup> The group included other writers of the day such as Patricia Highsmith, Marijane Meaker, and Louise Fitzhugh, as well as future LGBT rights activist Edie Windsor, though meetings were purely social.<sup>135</sup> Hansberry carefully kept her work life separate from her love life, though several of her lesbian friends attended the premiere of *Raisin*, including Marie Rupert, Helen Leeds, and Renee Kaplan.<sup>136</sup>

While working on *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry began a relationship with Molly Malone Cook, a local West Village resident and photographer for the *Village Voice*.<sup>137</sup> Both had a strong artistic drive and showcased a mastery of portraiture in their work (Hansberry with the written word and Cook with photographs).<sup>138</sup> During the time that Hansberry dated Cook, Nemiroff continued to be a lifeline to her writing, and he shared many of

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<sup>131</sup> Lorraine Hansberry to *The Ladder*, [August]1957.

<sup>132</sup> Lorraine Hansberry to *The Ladder*, 1957, vol. I, no. 8 (May 1957), p. 26, 28. <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/lorraine-hansberry/quoted>

<sup>133</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>134</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>135</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>136</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>137</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 92.

<sup>138</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 91.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 21

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the “life-changing moments” associated with the production of *Raisin*, consequently leaving Cook out of some of the most important events of Hansberry’s life at the time.<sup>139</sup> Hansberry and Cook’s relationship ended around the same time that *Raisin* premiered on Broadway.<sup>140</sup>

Soon after the premiere, Hansberry began dating Renee Kaplan, who happened to live close to her Bleeker Street apartment. Kaplan later recalled,

When she lived on Bleeker and I lived on Grove Street, which was right around the corner, we had a love affair. She gave the impression that this was a new experience for her. I suspect she came to my apartment more often than I went to hers. I have a feeling that I cooked more, and Bobby was more often in Bleeker Street.<sup>141</sup>

The relationship lasted about two years, but the pair remained close friends.

Being closeted was challenging for Hansberry, and Strain posited that this may have contributed to her sense of isolation.<sup>142</sup> Her relationships with women were dear, and would last until the end of her life, but she could not publicly fight for LGBT rights, as she had with civil rights and other causes. It was an aspect of her identity that she hid from most of the world. Dorothy Burnham, a friend of Hansberry, said:

Her life as a lesbian, she never talked about that, and yet was so open about everything else, about her politics and her writing and her relationships with other people. So it must have been quite difficult.<sup>143</sup>

Hansberry’s relationship with her husband was judged harshly by her lesbian friends, who did not understand it.<sup>144</sup> They felt that Nemiroff was “less than a man” for his continued devotion to her.<sup>145</sup> Nemiroff, for his part, accepted the lack of a romantic relationship as long as he remained part of Hansberry’s writing life. He also

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<sup>139</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 92.

<sup>140</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 92.

<sup>141</sup> Harris, “Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry.”

<sup>142</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>143</sup> As quoted in Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>144</sup> Harris, “Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry.”

<sup>145</sup> Harris, “Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry.”

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 22

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helped hide Hansberry's lesbianism from the press.<sup>146</sup> Renee Kaplan said of Hansberry's relationship with Nemiroff:

On the surface it appeared that Bobby was so easygoing that he would do whatever he could for her. He was there to help her, and he didn't make demands, but that was a demand. The access.<sup>147</sup>

Though it was a painful aspect of their relationship, Nemiroff acknowledged her lesbianism and would later write that it "was not a peripheral or casual part of her life but contributed significantly on many levels to the sensitivity and complexity of her view on human beings and of the world."<sup>148</sup> However, he remained fiercely protective, and for many years after her death he carefully managed her legacy in such a way that her lesbian identity did not emerge. Some of her archived papers were placed in a box marked "restricted" and it was only in the early 2010s that the Lorraine Hansberry Estate allowed researchers to have access to them.<sup>149</sup> Cheryl Higashida notes that, in particular, "the intersections of Hansberry's anticolonial nationalism, feminism, and queer politics have generally been missed, ignored, or undertheorized."<sup>150</sup> Scholars have only recently begun to examine her role as a lesbian artist more carefully, in part because of the lack of access to primary source documents. Many of Hansberry's papers are now housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem.

Notably, despite crafting an extensive and detailed file, the FBI did not seem to make note of Hansberry's identity as a lesbian. It was extremely preoccupied with any possible Communist ties, but for whatever reason her sexual identity did not factor into its myriad reports. This stands in contrast to the FBI's suspicion of others, like James Baldwin, whose sexuality as a gay man was clearly noted. Though Hansberry's relationship with her husband may have helped shield her from further scrutiny in the matter, it is remarkable that her lesbian identity was kept out of over a thousand pages of FBI material. Perhaps it did not occur to the agents keeping tabs on her that her relationships with other women could be anything more than platonic friendships. As Imani Perry writes, the FBI "would look for everything, and see very little."<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>148</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>149</sup> Mumford, "Opening the Restricted Box."

<sup>150</sup> Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 59.

<sup>151</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 59.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 23

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### Post-*Raisin* Success

In 1960, Hansberry won the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best American Play for *A Raisin in the Sun*, becoming the first African American playwright, and the youngest playwright ever, to do so. She was at home, alone, in her apartment at 337 Bleecker Street when she heard the news.<sup>152</sup> An instant celebrity, Hansberry was photographed in her book-lined apartment by David Attie for *Vogue Magazine* one month later.

The FBI noted her newfound fame in its files, suggesting that an interview with her was inadvisable due to her celebrity, as it could be a great embarrassment to the agency if details of its investigation were made public.<sup>153</sup> People were enthralled by the young playwright. Noting that she was enjoying "every bit" of fame in a 1959 radio interview, she also said, "I think there comes a time when, you know, you pull the telephone out and you go off and you end it."<sup>154</sup> An off-handed comment that Hansberry had recently changed her telephone line to an unlisted number hints at the pressure that she felt from the outside world.<sup>155</sup>

Aside from the pressure of being an instantly recognizable celebrity, Hansberry was also isolated because of her race. She was one of the few Black women in her work-related social circle, and the lesbian women she socialized with were also all white.<sup>156</sup> Not only that, but she was married to a white man.

In a sea of white acquaintances, Hansberry's friendships with James Baldwin and singer Nina Simone were a likely reprieve. She had met Baldwin at the Actors Studio in 1958, and their friendship took off.<sup>157</sup> Both writers cared deeply about the other. Baldwin, a gay man, shared a similar experience with Hansberry, each dealing with racism, the threat of discrimination based on their homosexuality, and the daily realities of being famous Black creatives living in a predominantly white neighborhood (at the time, Baldwin lived at 81 Horatio Street, in Greenwich Village).

Hansberry was also acquainted with Bayard Rustin, the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In 1960, Rustin had planned a march on the Democratic National Convention in Los

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<sup>152</sup> Stuart Little, "Best Play Prize Won By a Negro Girl, 28," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 8, 1959.

<sup>153</sup> Lorraine Hansberry F.B.I. File, 1952-1965.

<sup>154</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, Interview with Studs Terkel, May 12, 1959.

<sup>155</sup> Ted Poston, "Closeup."

<sup>156</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>157</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 118.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 24

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Angeles, along with A. Philip Randolph and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>158</sup> However, Black congressman Adam Clayton Powell threatened King, saying that he would accuse him of having an affair with Rustin if he proceeded with the protest.<sup>159</sup> The threat was baseless, but King cancelled the march.<sup>160</sup> In October, 1960, Hansberry wrote Rustin a letter. In it, she writes “I was shocked at the Powell business and horrified. Needless to say, you are one of the most precious sons that the Negro people and this country ever produced.”<sup>161</sup>

Hansberry’s letter to Rustin also offers a glimpse into how she saw her role as an artist and activist after *Raisin*.

The end result of three years is that I have been on many a lecture platform and written many an article and attended many a meeting – and have written not a single thing in the field of drama. This is an improper contribution for one who imagines that they have a meaningful contribution to our culture and its agonies. Whatever weight my public remarks or [word handwritten here that may or may not replace the or] activities have had was due to whatever stature I had achieved as a writer. It is madness then to further neglect or abuse that particular opportunity to be [be is also handwritten] an effective human being...I am afraid that the temperament of our culture does not understand the “political” artist, while, in fact, there is no other kind. For my part I want to further entrench myself as artist before I again launch myself as citizen.<sup>162</sup>

By 1960, Hansberry began to retreat from the public eye. Bolstered by funds from *Raisin*, and with Nemiroff’s encouragement, she purchased a townhouse at 112 Waverly Place, half a block from Washington Square Park. She moved into the apartment on the top floor. It was not far from her apartment at 337 Bleecker Street, but it may have offered a much greater psychological distance. There, she had her own space away from Nemiroff, and an address that had yet to be extensively publicized.

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<sup>158</sup> Thad Morgan, “Why MLK’s Right-Hand Man, Bayard Rustin, Was Nearly Written Out of History,” History.com, January 15, 2020. <https://www.history.com/news/bayard-rustin-march-on-washington-openly-gay-mlk>.

<sup>159</sup> Morgan, “Why MLK’s Right-Hand Man, Bayard Rustin, Was Nearly Written Out of History.”

<sup>160</sup> Morgan, “Why MLK’s Right-Hand Man, Bayard Rustin, Was Nearly Written Out of History.”

<sup>161</sup> Lorraine Hansberry to Bayard Rustin, October 11, 1960. Rustin’s surviving partner, Walter Naegle, provided this letter to the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project.

<sup>162</sup> Lorraine Hansberry to Bayard Rustin, October 11, 1960.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 25

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The building at 112 Waverly Place was also home to Dorothy Secules, a woman fifteen years Hansberry's senior, who shared her passion for politics.<sup>163</sup> Secules had rented an apartment on the lower floor of the building since the 1930s, and with the purchase of 112 Waverly, Hansberry became her landlord.<sup>164</sup> The two women met on the stairs in between their two apartments and fell in love.<sup>165</sup>

### The Last Years of Hansberry's Life

Balancing her role as a celebrity and her need to be creative and productive was difficult for Hansberry. In the early 1960s, she struggled with increasing writer's block and was stuck in her attempts to write new work. In 1962, Nemiroff suggested that a second home away from the city might help Hansberry focus on her writing.<sup>166</sup> She purchased a cabin in Croton-on-Hudson, in northern Westchester County, which she called "Chitterling Heights." However, this separated her from Secules and contributed to the tension in her marriage. It was a "near-constant tug" between her and Nemiroff.<sup>167</sup>

In 1963, Hansberry fell ill with seizures and stomach pain.<sup>168</sup> She was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but Nemiroff decided not to tell her about the diagnosis in order to preserve her sense of hope (a care strategy that was accepted at the time). She underwent several surgeries and procedures, but her pain and ailments continued.

In 1964, Hansberry was frequently in and out of the hospital. Renee Kaplan had an apartment near the hospital, and Hansberry's room faced her window.<sup>169</sup> The two waved at each other "all the time." Hansberry continued her relationship with Secules, who helped care for her alongside Nemiroff. After years of separation, Hansberry officially obtained a divorce from Nemiroff on March 10, 1964, in Juarez, Mexico, on grounds of incompatibility.<sup>170</sup> Miranda d'Ancona, a friend of Hansberry, suggested that the divorce was Hansberry's way of putting things in order before she died, of making a stand for herself.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>164</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>165</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>166</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>167</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>168</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>169</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>170</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

<sup>171</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 26

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Hansberry's vivid dedication to activism continued until her death. Even while gravely ill, she hosted fundraisers, created captions for a book to benefit the civil rights movement, and attended a famous meeting between civil rights leaders and then Attorney General Robert Kennedy.<sup>172</sup> She knew her time was limited but chose to devote what energy she had to the causes that had galvanized her all her life.<sup>173</sup>

In the last few years of her life Hansberry worked simultaneously on several plays, including *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*; *Les Blancs*; a play about Toussaint L'Ouverture; and a teleplay, *What Use Are Flowers*, a response to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>174</sup> Hansberry managed to complete the writing of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, which opened on Broadway shortly before her death.<sup>175</sup> She had been unable to craft it to the level of perfection that she wanted, and some critics were confused by the drama's focus on a white intellectual.<sup>176</sup> Nevertheless, for Hansberry it was a clear political statement. The play was set in Greenwich Village, in an apartment not unlike her residence at 337 Bleecker Street.

On January 12th, 1965, Hansberry died of pancreatic cancer. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* closed its run on Broadway that same day in honor of her death, and never reopened. Dorothy Secules and Renee Kaplan were both listed as "honorary pallbearers" at her funeral.<sup>177</sup>

### Legacy

Hansberry's influence was profound despite her untimely death at the age of 34. In her short lifetime she had transformed theater and proven that Black stories could be both profitable and engaging. She had campaigned against racial injustice and worked to bring Black stories to the greater American imagination.

Although Hansberry identified only privately as a lesbian – through certain social circles and the use of a pen name – she made important literary contributions to national gay and lesbian magazines in their earliest years and became a member of the New York chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis soon after the chapter's founding in 1958. Her plays and writings on lesbian themes inspired the lesbian poet, writer, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde. In her 1986 book *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities*, Lorde wrote "When

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<sup>172</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>173</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>174</sup> Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 63.

<sup>175</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>176</sup> Strain, *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart*.

<sup>177</sup> Harris, "Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry."



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 27

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you see the plays and read the words of Lorraine Hansberry, you are reading the words of a woman who loved women deeply.”<sup>178</sup>

*A Raisin in the Sun* also influenced the feminist author bell hooks, who cited the play in her 2009 book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*:

Away from my home state I often found myself among people who saw me as clinging to old-fashioned values, who pitied me because I did not know how to be opportunistic or play the games that would help me get ahead. I am reminded of this tension causing duality of desire when I read Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the play she dramatizes the conflicts that emerge when the values of belonging, the old ways, collide with the values of enterprise, and career opportunism... There is very little published work that looks at the psychological turmoil black folks faced as they made serious geographical changes that brought with them new psychological demands.<sup>179</sup>

*A Raisin in the Sun* is now a classic play, one taught in high school literature classes across the country. Even many of the critics who had strongly critiqued *Raisin* when it was originally produced later acknowledged it as a great work.<sup>180</sup> In 1987, the well-known African American playwright Amiri Baraka wrote that:

*Raisin* typifies American society in a way that reflects more accurately the real lives of the black U. S. majority than any work that ever received commercial exposure before it, and few if any since. It has the life that only classics can maintain.<sup>181</sup>

He goes on to point out that “*Raisin* lives in large measure because black people have kept it alive.”<sup>182</sup>

Robert Nemiroff became Hansberry’s literary executor after her death. In this role he carefully curated a record of Hansberry’s life and written works over the course of many years. He also worked to finish some of her earlier unfinished and unpublished works, including the dramatic play *Les Blancs* and the autobiographical play

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<sup>178</sup> Audre Lorde, *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing across Sexualities* (New York, NY: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>179</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 21-22.

<sup>180</sup> J. Wynn Rousuck, “Hansberry’s ‘Raisin’ Finds New Place in Sun: Former Critics Now See 1959 Play as a Classic,” *Sun*, April 24, 1988.

<sup>181</sup> Amiri Baraka, “A Raisin in the Sun’s Enduring Passion,” *Excerpted from A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 1.

<sup>182</sup> Baraka, “A Raisin in the Sun’s Enduring Passion,” 1.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 28

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*Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words: To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, which inspired the 1969 song “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” by Nina Simone.

The play *Les Blancs* was first started by Hansberry in 1960. She produced several drafts prior to her death in 1965. Using notes left by Hansberry, Nemiroff finished a preliminary draft of the play in 1966, in accordance with her wishes. The play opened at the Longacre Theater on November 15, 1970 and ran until December 19. Nemiroff continued to edit the text version of the play until a revised edition was published in 1983.<sup>183</sup> According to Margaret B. Wilkerson, in this work Hansberry was the first African American playwright to explore the African quest for freedom from European colonists. Set in an African village facing the threat of colonialism, the play explores systemic racism in what has been called “a disturbingly beautiful tale of colonial tensions.”<sup>184</sup>

Hansberry’s work has had lasting impact on American culture, and the continued popularity of her plays reflects this. Though *Les Blancs* had only a short run on Broadway in 1970, it was revived in 2016 at London’s National Theater. The *New York Times* critic Alex Soloski described the production as “haunting, haunted, devastating, it’s a work of the past that speaks — lucidly and startlingly — to the confusions of the present.”<sup>185</sup>

*A Raisin in the Sun* has had even more of an influence. The original play has inspired several others, including the musical *Raisin*, which ran on Broadway for 847 performances from October 1973 to December 1975. *Raisin* featured music by Judd Woldin, lyrics by Robert Brittan, and a book by Robert Nemiroff and Charlotte Zaltzberg. In 1974, the production won the Tony Award for Best Musical. *A Raisin in the Sun* has also been revived twice on Broadway, in 2004 and 2014. The first revival ran from April 26 to July 11, 2004, at the Royale Theatre. It won two 2004 Tony Awards for Best Actress in a Play and Best Featured Actress in a Play. The second revival ran from April 3 to June 15, 2014, at the Ethel Barrymore Theater (where the play debuted in 1959). It won three 2014 Tony Awards for Best Revival of a Play, Best Performance by an Actress in a Featured Role in a Play, and Best Direction of a Play. The play has been revived frequently at regional theaters, including a 2019 production at the Williamstown Theater Festival in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

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<sup>183</sup>Joy L. Abell, “African/American: Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* and the American Civil Rights Movement,” *African American Review*, vol. 35, issue 3 (Fall 2001), 459.

<sup>184</sup>Jane Shilling, “*Les Blancs*: A Disturbingly Beautiful Tale of Colonial Tensions and Lost Fathers,” *The Telegraph*, March 31, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/les-blancs-a-disturbingly-beautiful-tale-of-colonial-tensions-an/>.

<sup>185</sup>Alexis Soloski, “Review: ‘*Les Blancs*’ is an Anguished Play for an Anguished Moment,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/theater/les-blancs-review-lorraine-hansberry.html>.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York, New York County

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 29

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In recent years, *A Raisin in the Sun* has also inspired more creative adaptations. *The Raisin Cycle* combines three plays set in sequence to expand the story of the Youngers.<sup>186</sup> It was produced in Baltimore in 2013. The first play to be presented is *Clybourne Park*, the 2010 *Raisin* spinoff by Bruce Norris, which won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 2012 Tony Award for Best Play. The play tells the story of the family that sells the home to the Youngers. Next, the audience is presented with *A Raisin in the Sun*. The third play in the series is the 2013 play by Kwame Kwei-Armah, *Beneatha's Place*, which follows the story of Beneatha after the events of *Raisin*.

Today, Hansberry is remembered not only for her groundbreaking play, which became part of the established American literary canon, but also as an important and dedicated activist who worked tirelessly at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality throughout her short lifetime. Her residence at 337 Bleecker Street is the place most significantly associated with Hansberry's life as an artist. She lived in this apartment for the majority of her adult life, from 1953 until 1960, shortly before her untimely death in 1965. She wrote her most important works there, especially *A Raisin in the Sun*, her award-winning play, and she became widely known to and appreciated by critics and the public while living here. During this time period, she also worked as an activist, became more confident of her lesbian identity, and began to publish in lesbian magazines. The apartment itself retains the basic character-defining features of her residency, including size, plan, important rooms, finishes, windows, and some details, such as a living room mantel.

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<sup>186</sup> David Zurawik, "Baltimore's Center Stage Looks Very Good in PBS Documentary on 'Raisin' Cycle," *The Baltimore Sun*, October 25, 2013, [https://web.archive.org/web/20141007134752/http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2013-10-25/entertainment/baltimore-center-stage-pbs-raisin-cycle-20131018\\_1\\_sun-revisited-kwame-kwei-armah-raisin-cycle/2](https://web.archive.org/web/20141007134752/http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2013-10-25/entertainment/baltimore-center-stage-pbs-raisin-cycle-20131018_1_sun-revisited-kwame-kwei-armah-raisin-cycle/2).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 1

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☐ See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 2

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 1

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### Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary is indicated by a heavy line on the enclosed map with scale.

### Boundary Justification

The boundary was drawn to coincide with the tax parcel associated with 337 Bleecker Street, which was the boundary during the period of significance.

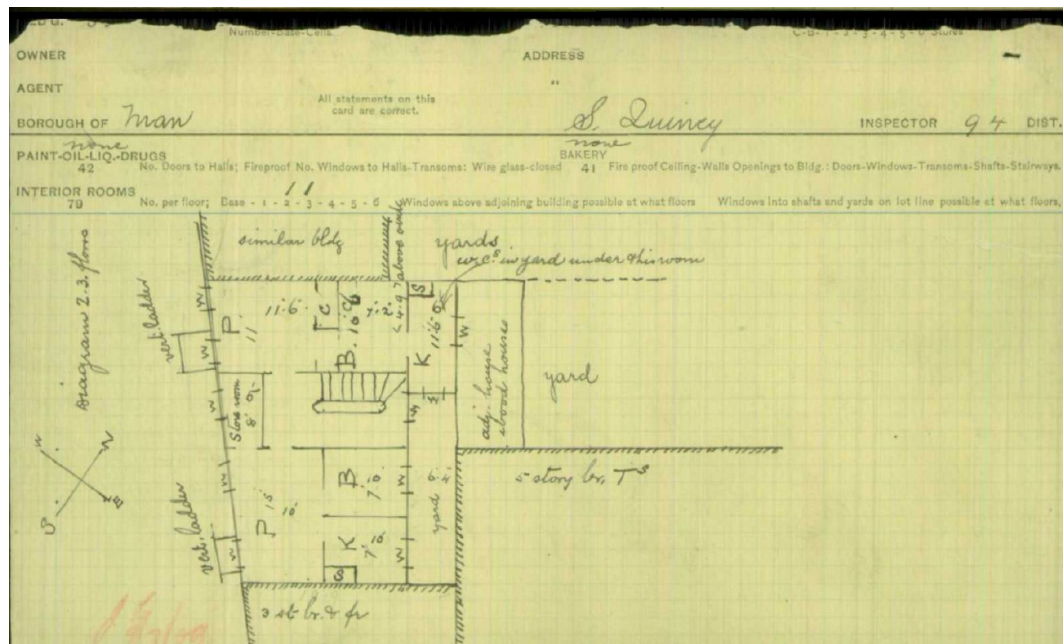
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United States Department of the Interior  
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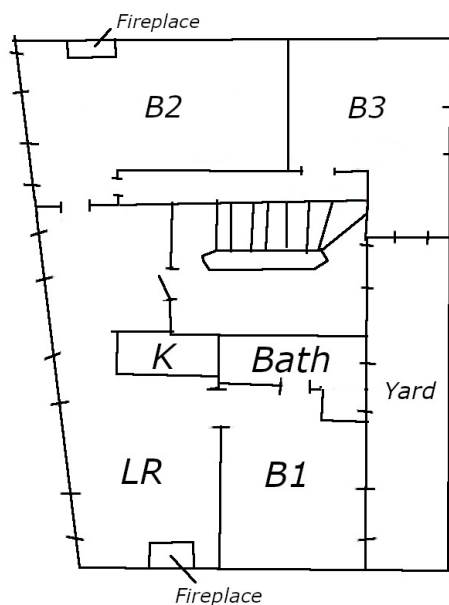
Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number other Page 1



Floorplan during Hansberry's residence



Current floorplan [not to scale]

☐ See continuation sheet

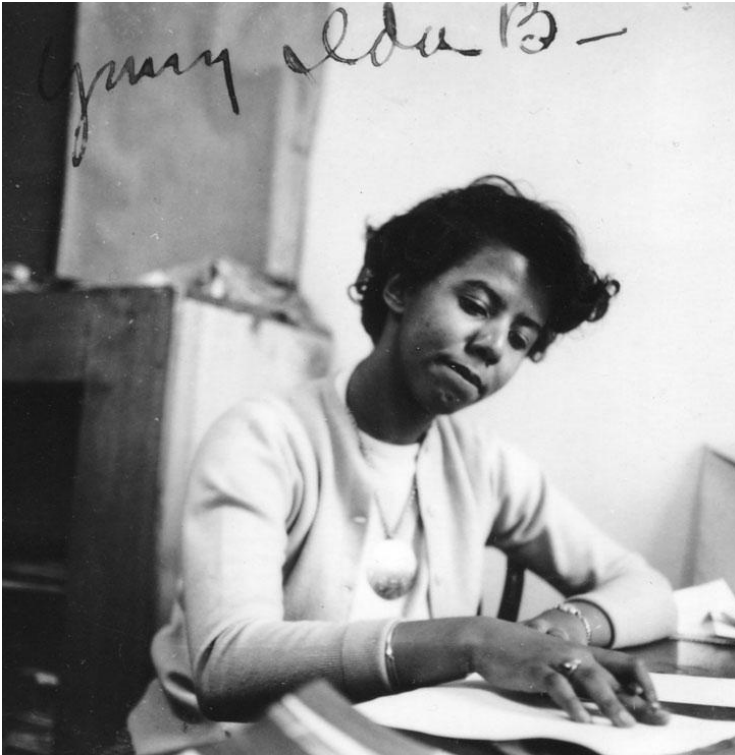
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National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number other Page 2

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Hansberry at her desk at *Freedom* magazine, 1952, unknown photographer



Hansberry speaking at an NAACP rally in Harlem, 1959  
photo Gin Briggs, Lorraine Hansberry Properties Trust



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number other Page 3

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Hansberry in front of bookcases at her Bleecker St apartment, 1959, photo David Attie, *Vogue*

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number other Page 4



Lorraine Hansberry at her typewriter in the Bleecker St apartment, April 1959  
Photo: David Attie, *Vogue*



☐ See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number photos Page 1

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### Photos

Photographer, Photo 1: Christopher Brazee, 2016  
174 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
Troy, New York 12180

Photographer, Photo 2 Victoria Wurman, 2020  
337 Bleecker St  
New York, New York 10014

Photographer, Photos 3, 4: Gabriela Marin, 2021  
Bold New York  
632 Broadway  
New York, New York 10012

Tiff Files: CD-R of .tiff files on file at  
National Park Service  
Washington, D.C.  
and  
New York State Historic Preservation Office  
Waterford, NY 12188

### Views:

0001: 337 Bleecker Street, exterior, view east

0002: Interior, entrance hall, central stairwell, second floor landing and stairs to third floor (with wood balustrade, wood baseboard, and wood window trim), view northeast

0003: Interior, Hansberry apartment, living room with kitchen at left, view southeast

0004: Interior, Hansberry apartment, writing studio, view northwest

☐ See continuation sheet



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National Park Service

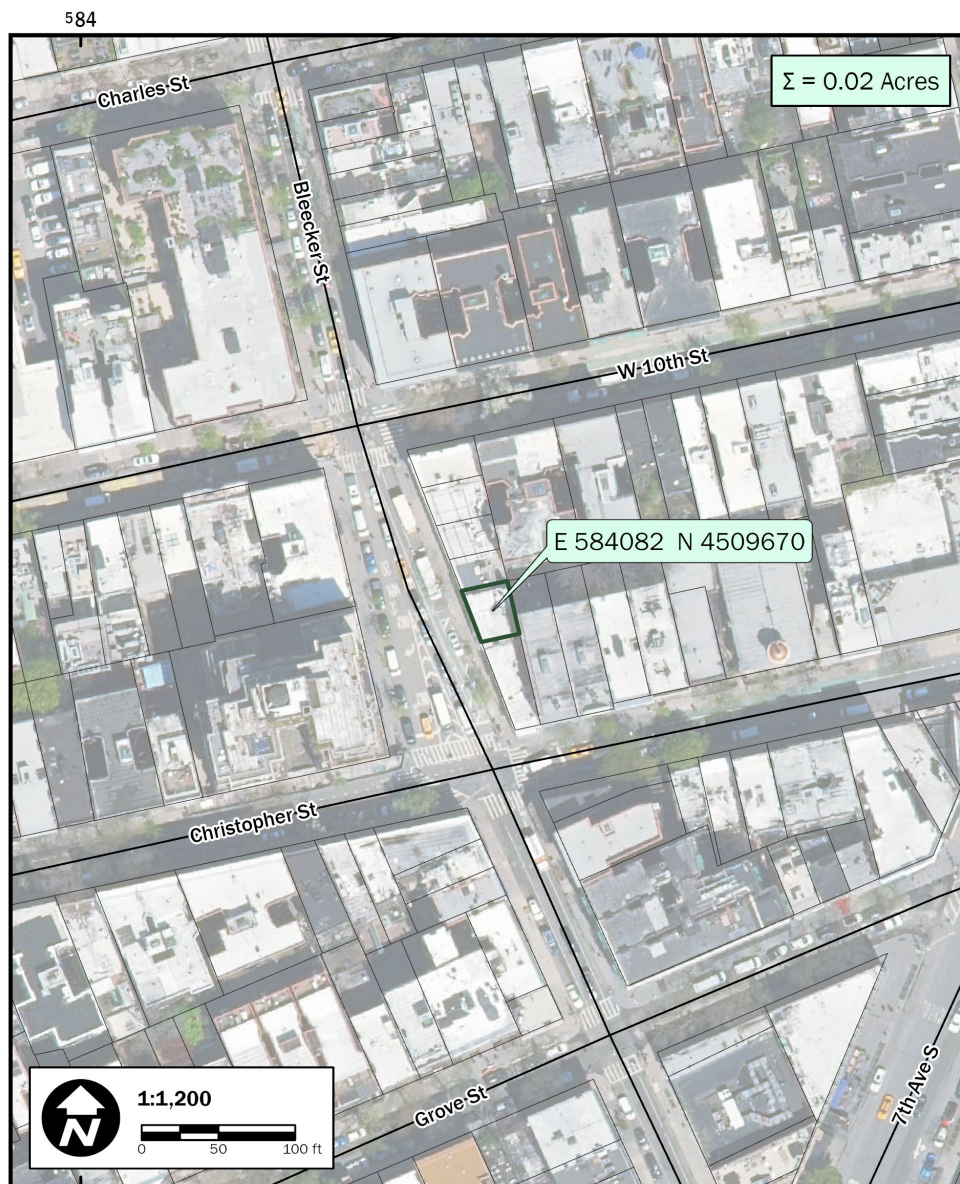
Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number maps Page 1

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York

337 Bleecker Street  
New York, NY 10014



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N  
Projection: Transverse Mercator  
Datum: North American 1983  
Units: Meter

 Nomination Boundary



Parks, Recreation  
and Historic Preservation

 See continuation sheet

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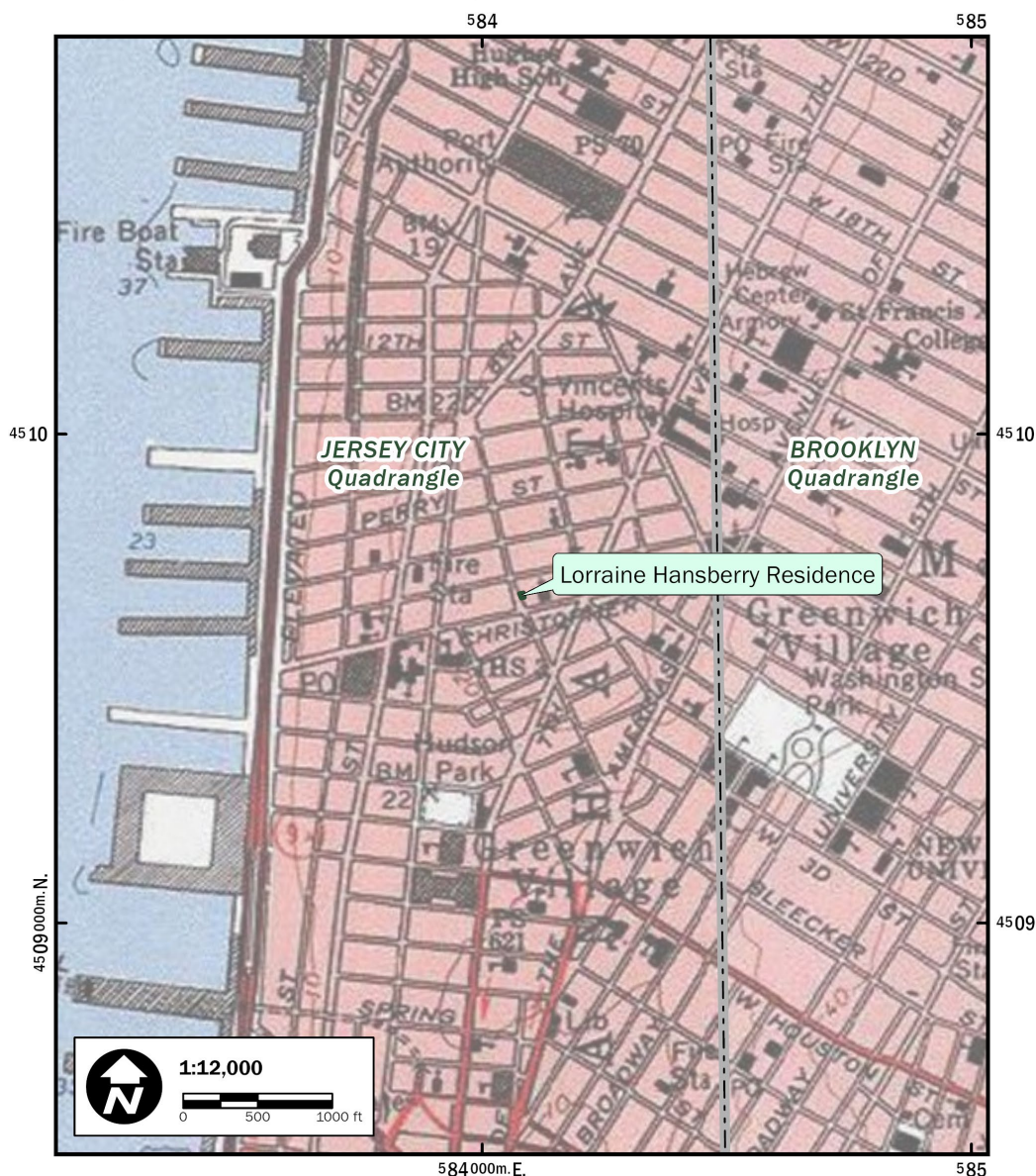
Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
New York County, New York

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number maps Page 2

Lorraine Hansberry Residence  
Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York

337 Bleecker Street  
New York, NY 10014



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N  
Projection: Transverse Mercator  
Datum: North American 1983  
Units: Meter

 Lorraine Hansberry Residence



Parks, Recreation  
and Historic Preservation

☐ See continuation sheet





Sarah Carroll  
Chair

March 9, 2021

R. Daniel Mackay  
Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation  
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer  
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation  
P.O. Box 189  
Waterford, NY 12188-0189

Re: Lorraine Hansberry Residence, 337 Bleecker Street, Manhattan (Block 619, Lot 51)

Dear Deputy Commissioner Mackay:

I am writing on behalf of Chair Sarah Carroll in response to your request for comment on the eligibility of the Lorraine Hansberry Residence at 337 Bleecker Street in Manhattan for the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

This building appears to meet the criteria for inclusion on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. We note that the building is designated as part of the Greenwich Village Historic District designated April 29, 1969. Based on our review of the building and its association with Lorraine Hansberry, the Commission supports its nomination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Kate Lemos McHale". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kate Lemos McHale  
Director of Research



**FIELD SERVICES BUREAU • DIVISION FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**  
**STATE AND NATIONAL REGISTERS OF HISTORIC PLACES PROGRAM**

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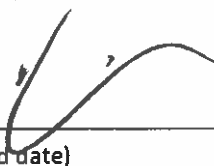
**STATEMENT OF OWNER SUPPORT**

Before an individual nomination proposal will be reviewed or nominated, the owner(s) of record must sign and date the following statement:

I, Andrew Wrublin, am the owner of the property at  
(print or type owner name)

337 Bleecker St New York, NY  
(street number and name, city, village or town, state of nominated property)

I support its consideration and inclusion in the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

 12/4/19  
(signature and date)

Mailing Address:

134 W 25th St 5th Floor  
New York, Ny 10001  
\_\_\_\_\_

Revised 9/09





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337



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33

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RICHARD  
Henderson











